

# **DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

## **White-tailed Prairie Dog Translocation**

USDI, Bureau of Land Management  
Billings Field Office

and

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Wildlife Division

**May 1, 2006**

This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to satisfy the requirements in the Administrative Rules of Montana (12.9.1001-12.9.1050) for translocation of prairie dogs.

This EA is prepared using both the State of Montana (MEPA) and Federal (NEPA) environmental assessment formats and guidelines. Therefore, there may be differences from the usual way of presenting information.

Dennis Flath (FWP), Dan Hinckley (BLM) and Jay Parks (BLM) produced the original draft in January 1999.

### **Conformance With Applicable BLM Land Use Plan:**

This proposed action is tiered to the following land use plan:

Name of Plan: Billings RMP Date Approved: September 1984.

This plan has been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5.

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## **PART 1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE ACTION**

### **1.1 Proposed Action**

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) are proposing to translocate white-tailed prairie dogs at risk of loss due to highway reconstruction. This will entail translocating up to 450 (maximum) individual white-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys leucurus*) to historically occupied colony sites. Translocation for the purposes of this assessment is the transfer of prairie dogs from their current location to historic, but currently unoccupied colonies on BLM lands. Translocation efforts would begin in June 2006, with the translocation of prairie dogs from three colonies at immediate risk, and may be continued over several years based on the effectiveness of translocation efforts and other factors (e.g. sylvatic plague) that may affect prairie dog populations. Depending on prairie dog population dynamics, translocation efforts may continue during the next five years for the purpose of re-establishing up to 2 colonies on BLM lands. Translocation under Alternative B or C would follow specific protocols spelled out in Administrative Rules of Montana (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-951.htm>), jointly adopted by FWP and the FWP Commission in 2004.

### **1.2 Need for the Proposed Action**

Section 87-5-103 (1), Montana Code Annotated states that nongame wildlife species should be 'perpetuated as members of ecosystems'. Re-establishment of white-tailed prairie dogs at colonies from which they have been extirpated would provide prey and habitat for a variety of wildlife, as well as ensure maintenance of a viable population of white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana. There is currently an immediate threat to three colonies along Montana Highway 72 (Chance Bridge, Border, Grove Creek, Figure 1). Montana Department of Transportation is scheduled to widen and re-align the highway in 2006 (approved by categorical exclusion; Wyoming Line-Belfry C.N. 4065, October 2003, Appendix A), and the proximity of these colonies to the highway would likely result in their destruction during construction. Translocation of white-tailed prairie dogs threatened with immediate loss is the highest priority.

The white-tailed prairie dog appears on the Natural Heritage Program and FWP "Species of Concern" list, as well as BLM's "Special Status Species" list in Montana. Designation as a species "of concern" is an informal designation intended to help FWP and other entities direct limited resources to highest priority needs. Since 2001, Montana FWP and the FWP Commission have extended a year-round shooting closure to white-tailed prairie dogs occupying public lands (other than state school trust lands) in southern Carbon County (<http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/concern/prairiedogs.html#white>). The Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC) has extended this protection to the Warren colony where it occupies DNRC lands.

In July 2002, the Center for Native Ecosystems *et al* petitioned the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the white-tailed prairie dog as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) ([http://www.nativeecosystems.org/prairiedogs/whitetailed/020711\\_petition.pdf](http://www.nativeecosystems.org/prairiedogs/whitetailed/020711_petition.pdf)). In November

2004, USFWS reviewed the petition and concluded the petition did not contain substantial scientific data that the petitioned action may be warranted.

(<http://www.r6.fws.gov/species/mammals/wtprairiedog/wtpdog90day.pdf>)

Montana is at the northern edge of the distribution of the white-tailed prairie dog. The total acreage occupied by white-tailed prairie dogs is limited to the portion of southern Carbon County adjoining the border with Wyoming, and has declined substantially during the past 30 years. Flath (1979, Appendix B) mapped the distribution of white-tailed prairie dogs during the 1970s and documented 15 colonies totaling about 312.8 ha (773 acres). Flath (pers. commun.) re-examined 14 of 15 colony sites documented in 1997 and found only 2 colonies remaining, totaling 39.3 ha (97 acres; Table 1).

In 2003, known white-tailed prairie dog colonies were revisited and active colonies were mapped. This effort documented approximately 48 ha (119 ac) of white-tailed prairie dog habitat in 6 colonies (C. Knowles, Fauna West Consulting, "An Inventory of Black and White-tailed Prairie Dog Colonies in the Billings and Powder River Resource Areas", 2/2/2004). Surveys by Marmot's Edge Conservation in 2005 ("Priority Sending and Receiving Sites for White-tailed Prairie Dog Relocation in Carbon, Co., Montana" prepared for BLM, Billings Field Office, June 2005) identified 24 colonies (10 extant with 145.8 potential ha or 360 potential acres, and 14 unoccupied historical) in first step in the process of preparing for this translocation.

Current known acreage of white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana is 102.5 ha (253 acres) at 10 colonies with a distribution that is widely dispersed and may not facilitate genetic exchange between colonies. Natural prairie dog recolonization in areas thought eliminated by plague in recent years has been very slow or non-existent (FaunaWest 1998). Maintenance of historic habitat is needed in order to maintain species diversity in the area. Although it is recognized there may be additional small colonies and there is the possibility of a few remnant individuals in presumed abandoned colonies, failure to re-establish white-tailed prairie dogs at formerly occupied colonies could put the species at risk of extirpation from Montana (Faunawest 1998, Knowles 2002, Montana Prairie Dog Working Group 2002).

Factors implicated in the decline of Montana's white-tailed prairie dog population include disease, historic eradication efforts and conversion of shrub/grassland habitats to agriculture. Observations over time (D. Flath, pers. commun) have indicated that plague may have been impacted some colonies as early as 1989-1991. Table 2 indicates the changing status of the white-tailed prairie dog in Montana over the last few decades.

Many wildlife species depend on prairie dogs and associated habitat, including mountain plovers (*Charadrius montanus*) and burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*). Predators include raptors, badgers (*Taxidea taxus*), bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and western rattlesnakes (*Crotalus viridis*). It should be noted that the founder population of black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*), a prairie dog ecosystem obligate and an endangered species, originated from

a large white-tailed prairie dog town near Meeteetse, Wyoming, about 50 miles south of Montana's active white-tailed prairie dog population.

TABLE 1: CHANGES IN STATUS OF WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG (WTPD) COLONIES IN CARBON COUNTY, MT, 1997-2005 (HECTARES, HA; ACRES, AC).

Year	Colony Name	Status
1997	Robertson Draw	35.6 ha (87.9 ac)
	Chance Bridge	3.2 ha (7.9 ac)
1999	Robertson Draw	Stable
	Chance Bridge	Stable
	Duplex	Newly found; WTPD and BTPD*
	S. Sage Creek	Newly found; only 5-6 animals observed
2000	Robertson Draw	Unchanged
	Chance Bridge	Lost 40% to cultivation
	Duplex	Increasing in size
	S. Sage Creek	Increasing in size; ~1.5 ha (3.7 ac)
	Warren	Newly found; ~8 ha (19.8 ac)
2003	Robertson Draw	15.4 ha (38.1 ac), 8 WTPDs observed
	Chance Bridge	5.1 ha (12.6 ac); 8 WTPDs observed
	Duplex	9.1 ha (22.5 ac); 6 WTPDs observed
	S. Sage Creek	5.9 ha (14.6 ac); 6 WTPDs observed
	Warren	7.5 ha (18.5 ac); 4 WTPDs observed
	Inferno	Newly found; 4.2 ha (10.4)
2005	Robertson Draw	16.2 ha (40.0 ac)
	Chance Bridge	5.0 ha (12.4 ac); 46 WTPDs observed
	Duplex	9.2 ha (22.7 ac); 17 WTPDs observed
	S. Sage Creek	5.9 ha (14.6 ac); may be increasing
	Warren	7.5 ha (18.5 ac); 6 WTPDs observed
	Inferno	4.2 ha (10.4 ac)
	Border	Newly found; 1.7 ha (4.2 ac)
	Grove Creek	Newly found; 2.3 ha (5.7 ac)
	Bear Creek	Newly found; 29.1 ha (47.1 ac)
	Riverview (Brown)	Newly found; 21.4 ha (52.9 ac)

\*WTPD = white-tailed prairie dogs; BTPD = black-tailed prairie dogs

TABLE 2: WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE-DOG COLONIES LOCATED DURING SURVEYS IN 1975-1977 AND COMPARED TO THOSE LOCATED IN 2003 AND 2005. THE LIST FOR EACH SURVEY YEAR IS IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER. MEASUREMENTS ARE IN HECTARES (ACRES).

<b>Colony Size 1975-1977</b>	<b>Colony Size 2003</b>	<b>Colony Size 2005</b>
2-4 (5-10)	16.4 (40.5)	16.2 (40)
0.8 (2)	5.1 (13)	5.0 (12)
30-34 (74-84)	5.9 (15)	9.2 (23)
8 (20)	9.1 (22.5)	4.2 (10)
100 (247)	7.5 (18.5)	7.5 (18.5)
1 (2.5)	4.2 (10)	5.9 (14.6)
28-40 (69-99)		1.7 (4.2)
4-8 (10-20)	-	29.1 (72)
32 (79)	-	2.3 (6)
20-32 (49-79)	-	21.4 (53)
16-24 (39.5-59)	-	-
8-20 (20-9)	-	-
1 (2.5)	-	-
0.4-1 (1-2.5)	-	-
1-4 (2.5-10)	-	-
<b>15 colonies 280 (692)</b>	<b>6 colonies 48 (120)</b>	<b>10 colonies 102.5 (253)</b>

### **1.3 Objective of the Preferred Action**

The long-term objective of this action is to ensure maintenance of a viable population of white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana. The short-term objective of this action is to translocate white-tailed prairie dogs from 3 colonies adjacent to Highway 72 that are at immediate threat.

### **1.4 Related Documents that Influence the Scope of this EA**

- BLM Billings Resource Management Plan (September 1984)  
(<http://www.mt.blm.gov/rmps/Billings/contents.html>)
- Conservation Plan for Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana (Montana Prairie Dog Working Group 2002)  
(<http://fwpp.mt.gov/fwpppaperapps/wildthings/pdconsplan.pdf>)

- Montana Department of Transportation: Wyoming Line – Belfry C.N. 4065 (approved by categorical exclusion October 2003)(Appendix A)
- Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management Environmental Impact Statement (BLM, 1997)  
(<http://www.mt.blm.gov/lands/sgmiles.html>)
- Food & Drug Administration (FDA) letter of exemption for Monkey Pox exclusion (Appendix C)
- White-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment, January 2006  
([http://www.r6.fws.gov/species/mammals/wtprairiedog/WTPD\\_CA\\_Final\\_08252004.pdf](http://www.r6.fws.gov/species/mammals/wtprairiedog/WTPD_CA_Final_08252004.pdf))

### **1.5 Relevant Federal, State, and Local Government, and Public Involvement**

Alternatives evaluated in this Environmental Assessment were discussed with members of the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group (an informal forum in which government agency, non-government organizations, private citizens work together to address issues related to both black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and BLM, Billings Field and State Office. Comments on the original draft version of this Environmental Assessment were solicited from the following cooperators:

- US Fish & Wildlife Service - Lou Hanebury, Billings,
- BLM, Montana and Wyoming State Offices
- BLM Billings Field Office, & Cody Field Office, WY
- U.S. Forest Service - Tom Whitford
- Animal and Plant Health and Inspection Service - Larry Handegard, Billings
- Montana Department Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, R-5
- Montana Department Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Helena
- Wyoming Game and Fish Department – Martin Grenier
- FaunaWest Wildlife Consultants – Craig Knowles
- Marmot’s Edge Conservation (Consultant) – Eric Atkinson
- BLM Grazing Permittees in affected area
- DNRC Billings Field Office – Gary Brandenburg, Land Use Specialist
- Montana Department of Transportation – Paul Sturm, biologist

Private Landowners within 6 miles of a given receiving area will receive a certified letter as per the Translocation Protocol ARM 12.9.1005 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-955.htm>). If requested by the public, an open house will be planned in Carbon, County to allow local landowners and interested publics the opportunity to comment on the proposed translocation in person.

USDA in Washington, DC has been contacted in order to obtain an exemption to the ban on moving prairie dogs relevant to Monkey Pox concerns that arose in 2004 (<http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2003/03-27557.htm>; Appendix C).



### **1.6 Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health:**

The “Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management Environmental Impact Statement” (BLM, 1997) address sensitive species (<http://www.mt.blm.gov/lands/sgmiles.html>). Guidance common to all alternatives amended all Land Use Plans and stated that some public rangelands would be managed for native wildlife species that require bare ground and/or short vegetation structure such as the prairie dog, mountain plover, and burrowing owl. It further stated that to be properly functioning, areas must have enough of these habitats to provide diversity in native plant and animal species.

The Miles City Standards and Guidelines cover the Billings Field Office. Standard #5 for Miles City states that an area would meet standards when habitats are provided for healthy, productive and diverse native plant and animal populations and communities. Viable populations were defined as populations that contain an adequate number of reproductive individuals distributed to ensure long-term existence.

The area would not meet standards, if it were evaluated in its present condition. Augmenting the white-tailed prairie dog population would meet or be required by that portion of Standard 5 for BLM managed lands and Montana state law for all lands.

### **1.7 Decision that must be made**

The Regional Supervisor for FWP, Region 5, will consider each alternative described in this EA and all comments provided by the public, and will approve or disapprove the translocation as per ARM 12.9.1005 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-955.htm>). The final Record-of-Decision for this EA will be rendered by the Regional Supervisor for FWP, Region 5 and the BLM, Billings Field Office Manager following the 30-day comment period.

### **1.8 Applicable Regulatory Requirements and Required Coordination**

- Monkey Pox exemption from Food & Drug Administration (FDA)(Appendix C)
- Prairie dog Translocation Protocol embodied in ARMs (12.9.1001 – 12.9.1050)
- State policy that ensures the perpetuation of nongame wildlife as ‘members of ecosystems’ (Section 87-5-103 (1), Montana Code Annotated) (<http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca/87/5/87-5-105.htm>)
- Prairie dogs are ‘nongame in need of management’ (87-5-102 and 87-5-105, MCA, and ARM 12.2.501, <http://161.7.8.61/12/12-55.htm>)
- Dual legal status of white-tailed prairie dogs as nongame wildlife in need of management (87-5-102 and 87-5-105, MCA and ARM 12.2.501) and as a vertebrate pest for the purposed of forming rodent control districts (80-7-1101, MCA)

Management of wildlife species is the responsibility of FWP, and the land onto which white-tailed prairie dogs will be translocated is public land managed by BLM. Therefore, coordination will be primarily among BLM and FWP, and neighboring private landowners.

## **PART 2.0 ALTERNATIVES**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Conservation Plan for Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana recognizes translocation as a management tool that can be used to enhance prairie dog populations and calls for establishment of a “programmatic relocation protocol” to guide all prairie dog translocations.

In 2004 FWP and the FWP Commission approved adoption of new ARM rules to guide future translocation of prairie dogs in Montana (ARM 12.9.1001 – 12.9.1050). These ARM rules were established under the authority of 87-5-105, MCA, which provides for establishment of regulations deemed necessary to manage wildlife species that have been designated “nongame wildlife in need of management.” Both the black-tailed prairie dog and white-tailed prairie dog have been designated as “nongame wildlife in need of management” (ARM 12.2.501).

The prairie dog translocation ARM rules established criteria that all prairie dog translocation proposals must comply with and also established standard procedures that must be followed in order for a translocation proposal to be considered for approval. The new rules are intended to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To provide consistent guidance and direction for identification of areas of collection (sending areas) and areas for release (receiving areas) designed to minimize potential spread of plague and to minimize the potential for translocation to result in detrimental impacts to agricultural production or to other wildlife species.
- 2) To provide consistent guidance and standard procedures for planning and conducting prairie dog translocations, to minimize the potential for plague to be spread.
- 3) To allow for supplementing or reestablishing prairie dogs in areas where they have declined.
- 4) To initiate, maintain, or enhance isolated populations
- 5) To allow for non-lethal removal and relocation of existing prairie dog colonies from undesirable areas to acceptable areas.
- 6) To allow for non-lethal control of increasing populations
- 7) To allow for increased prairie dog numbers to address habitat needs of dependent species (black-footed ferrets) or associated species (mountain plover, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk).

The proposed action will follow the guidelines established within these ARM rules.

### **2.2 Alternatives Eliminated from Further Study**

There were no alternatives eliminated from further study.

### **2.3 Alternative A – No action**

In the absence of intervention, prairie dogs residing along Highway 72 will most likely be lost to Montana’s white-tailed prairie dog population when construction is initiated in 2006. Reliance will be placed on natural recolonization as the means for formerly occupied prairie dog colonies

to be recolonized. Recolonization of extirpated colonies without intervention could take 20-30 years in the absence of plague.

It is unknown whether individual prairie dogs would vacate their burrows during earth-moving work by heavy machinery or whether survivors would be able to find suitable habitat in which to survive. The nearest known active or vacant white-tailed prairie dog colony is located more than 8 miles away from the colonies at Chance Bridge and Border, and the Grove Creek colony is ~2 miles from a currently occupied colony (Riverview). It is unlikely that any surviving individuals from the Chance Bridge and Border colonies could travel to suitable habitat. The only option for survivors would be adjacent private lands, where their presence may be untenable.

Plagued-out colonies have shown little if any evidence of re-population since 1992. On that basis, it is possible that a result of the no action alternative would be a greater likelihood that Montana's remnant white-tailed prairie dog population will decline further, perhaps to the point of being lost.

#### **2.4 Alternative B – Translocation of dogs immediately at risk along Highway 72**

**Sending Area.** Alternative B proposes to translocate three white-tailed prairie dog colonies (9 ha, 22 acres, approximately 150 adult and young-of-the-year white-tailed prairie dogs, Table 3) that will otherwise be lost during reconstruction of Highway 72. These priority colonies (Border, Chance Bridge, and Grove Creek) fit the criteria for sending areas as per ARM 12.9.1010 (c) of the Translocation ARM rule; the presence of prairie dogs where there is little opportunity to reconcile conflicts between land use and prairie dog occupancy (Figure 1).

**Receiving Area:** Two of the proposed receiving areas (Table 3; November and Fossil City) are historic colonies on BLM land that have been extirpated (12.9.1015 (a)). Two others, South Sage Creek (BLM land) and Warren (DNRC land) are active white-tailed prairie dog colonies with potential to expand into adjacent habitat (12.9.1015 (d); Figure 1). These potential receiving areas are located within the range previously occupied by white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana; are in an area where the potential for white-tailed prairie dogs to move or expand onto colonies where they are not wanted is minimal (i.e. isolated, public lands), occur in an area where white-tailed prairie dogs are below management objectives, and could assist with the enhancement of low white-tailed prairie dog populations in areas of suitable habitat.

Receiving areas will be assessed for the availability of open burrows. Both November and Fossil City appear to have remnant mounds, and may still have some subterranean burrow structure. In the absence of open burrows at receiving areas, silted-in holes from the previous occupancy would be reopened to provide temporary hiding cover for newly released prairie dogs and artificial burrows (as per Joe Truett, Turner Fund) will be provided where necessary.

On the advice of personnel from FaunaWest and Jo Ann Dullum (USFWS), who both have extensive prairie dog re-establishment experience, small cages will be placed over holes containing newly released prairie dogs to acclimate the animals to their new surroundings.

Temporary containment cages will be installed over each prairie dog hole and then removed when the prairie dogs have dug out. Such temporary containment (1-2 days, ‘soft-release’) promotes retention at receiving areas and reduces prairie dog movement post-release. Other release techniques may also be used on an experimental basis. Receiving areas lacking open burrows will be prepared by excavating trenches and inserting 4” diameter plastic tubing to serve as a temporary shelter for the initial release.

Land ownership patterns within a 6-mile radius for each of the proposed receiving areas is illustrated in Appendix F. Landowners within a 6-mile radius of each of the proposed receiving areas will be notified by certified mail, and receive a copy of this EA.

TABLE 3: IDENTIFIED SENDING & RECEIVING AREAS FOR WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG TRANSLOCATION UNDER ALTERNATIVE B

Name	Sending or Receiving	Status	Size (ha)	Latitude	Longitude	Ownership	Rationale
Chance Bridge	Sending	Active	5.0	45.04360	109.05390	Private	Hwy construction
Border	Sending	Active	1.7	45.00185	109.05500	Private	Hwy construction
Grove Cr	Sending	Active	2.3	45.08494	109.03063	Private	Hwy construction
November	Receiving	Extirpated	unkn	45.03696	108.82553	BLM	Intact burrows?
South Sage Cr	Receiving	Active	5.9	45.01220	108.63310	BLM/priv	Room to expand
Warren	Receiving	Active	7.5	45.04830	108.65500	DNRC	Room to expand
Fossil City	Receiving	Extirpated	<5**	45.0388	-108.5017	BLM	Burrows
Robertson Draw*	Receiving	Active	16.2	45.02060	109.23690	USFS	Could expand*

\* The potential of the Robertson Draw site will depend upon the outcome of current changes in land ownership and the possibilities of a developing subdivision.

\*\* Known historical colony size

**Monitoring.** A monitoring plan would be established as per the guidance in ARM 12.9.1020 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-963.htm>). In order to assess the success of translocating white-tailed prairie dogs, re-established colonies will be mapped (area calculated) and activity will be assessed annually for three years following translocations. This will be done to ascertain the success of the translocation as per our identified objectives.

Currently, 2 of the proposed receiving areas (November and Fossil City) are historically occupied colonies that currently have no white-tailed prairie dogs. If other active receiving areas are employed (South Sage Creek, Warren or Robertson Draw) in subsequent translocations, occupied white-tailed prairie dog acreage will be delineated prior to translocation of prairie dogs

to vacant portions of these colonies. Potential white-tailed prairie dog habitat at November is unknown but estimated to be less than 25 ac. Potential habitat at Fossil City is less than 10 ac.

Following translocation, receiving areas will be mapped with Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment. Mapping will be conducted by walking around the outermost active burrow (determined by the presence of prairie dogs, fresh scat or fresh digging) and record the locations in a track file. Results of post-translocation monitoring will be provided to FWP for inclusion in the statewide database.

FWP and BLM will collaborate to map all white-tailed prairie dog colonies at least every 5 years to continue to monitor population trends.

**Conflict Resolution Plan.** Refer to Appendix D as per ARM 12.9.1025 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-964.htm>).

**Capture and Transportation.** In the first year, prairie dog capture would be attempted between June 15, 2006 and October 31 and will consist of at between 30-150 individuals, consistent with ARM 12.9.1030 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-969.htm>). As a result of the imminent highway construction in the spring, the white-tailed prairie dogs will need to be captured prior to the June 30 date indicated in ARM 12.9.1030. *We request special permission from the FWP R5 Regional Supervisor for this early date in 2006.*

There have been few attempts to translocate white-tailed prairie dogs (throughout their range), but in light of highway reconstruction and imminent risk, we will attempt to capture all white-tailed prairie dogs at the 3 colonies along Highway 72 (up to 150 white-tailed prairie dogs). The total number of white-tailed prairie dogs to be translocated will include young-of-the-year and will depend on spring production. Translocation techniques to be employed have been developed by Dullum et al. (2005), Truett et al. (2001) and Werner et al. (2003), and are based on experience with black-tailed prairie dogs.

It has also been proposed that due to the less social nature of white-tailed prairie dogs, that success may be increased with the relocation of fewer animals, and by using a 'soft-release' technique (including the use of artificial burrows). If there are few animals trapped at highway receiving areas (<30 individuals; Grove Creek, Chance Bridge, Border), translocating prairie dogs at the edge of the S. Sage Creek (an occupied white-tailed prairie dog colony) would be preferable (in terms of retention at a new colony) to releasing a small number of individual prairie dogs at an isolated previously extirpated colony.

Attempts would be made to trap adult female prairie dogs with their young and to release these family groups in approximately the same spatial arrangement in which they were caught. Sex and age composition of prairie dogs selected for translocation would be largely dependent on capture results. The effects of release group size and density would be one of several variables considered in effectiveness evaluations. Other variables include length of time since historic

colony sites were vacated, presence of natural burrows, stocking density, sex and age composition of released groups, temporary caging at receiving areas (acclimation), spatial and social group effects, site variability, time of year etc. Re-establishment techniques would evolve as experience is gained.

**Sylvatic Plague Precautions and Quarantine Procedures.** Will follow ARM 12.9.1035 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-970.htm>). Sending and Receiving area would be monitored 14 days prior to trapping and again 48 hours prior to trapping to determine evidence of sylvatic plague. Prairie dogs will not be moved from an area with documented or presumed active sylvatic plague or within 5 miles of a sending area with active sylvatic plague for a minimum of one year. Should sylvatic plague be documented in the pre-trapping monitoring, FWP will be notified.

Areas targeted as receiving areas are presumed to have been impacted by sylvatic plague, rather than agricultural practices. The persistence of plague at a site is unknown, but transplants in 1997 and 1998 at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge to prairie dog colonies presumed to have been eliminated by plague have prospered.

Prairie dogs will be dusted with a flea/tick powder (carbaryl, permethrin, or other pulicide) to kill ectoparasites at the trap site. Any observation of sick or lethargic animals will trigger an immediate examination for plague. If symptoms cannot be explained by exposure to weather, specimens would be sent to the Center for Disease Control, Plague Branch in Fort Collins, CO.

In the absence of any evidence of plague, white-tailed prairie dogs captured from Grove Creek, Chance Bridge and Border colonies will be treated with a flea/tick powder (carbaryl, permethrin, or other pulicide) and, in the absence of any evidence of plague, will be ‘soft-released’ onto receiving areas (within 50 miles of the capture site, Table 4).

## **2.5 Alternative C – Translocating Prairie Dogs immediately at risk and re-establishing extirpated colonies – PREFERRED**

**Sending Area.** Alternative C proposes to translocate 3 white-tailed prairie dog colonies (9 ha, approximately 150 white-tailed prairie dogs), which are threatened with extirpation by highway construction. These priority colonies (Border, Chance Bridge, and Grove Creek) fit the criteria for sending areas as per ARM 12.9.1010 (c) of the Translocation ARM rule; the presence of prairie dogs where there is little opportunity to reconcile conflicts between land use and prairie dog occupancy (Figure 1).

Additionally in the long-term, attempts would be made to re-establish white-tailed prairie dog colonies at additional locations within their range in Montana (Table 4) between June 1, 2006 and October 31, 2010. Following the Translocation Protocol and proposal guidelines (ARM 12.9.1001, et seq.), white-tailed prairie dogs would be live-trapped from BLM lands (Sheep Creek, Dry Creek) in Wyoming or from ‘unwanted’ private colonies in Montana (colonies that meet the criteria for sending areas, ARM 12.9.1010 (a) and (b)). The longer term element of this alternative would be to translocate an additional 30-300 prairie dogs to 1-3 receiving areas.

The two sending areas in Wyoming are healthy populations of white-tailed prairie dogs. Trapping would not substantially impact any single donor population (e.g. less than 30% of the population would be trapped for translocation). We have been in contact with Wyoming Game and Fish biologist Martin Grenier. Staff with Wyoming Game & Fish is preparing to present this proposal to the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to seek approval.

Therefore, the total number of white-tailed prairie dogs proposed for translocation between 2006 and 2010 could total up to **450** white-tailed prairie dogs (up to 150 in the short-term to translocate prairie dogs under immediate threat, and up to 300 prairie dogs in the long-term to augment smaller active colonies and to re-establish additional prairie dogs at extirpated locations).

**Receiving Area.** Two of the proposed receiving areas (Table 3; November and Fossil City) are historic colonies on BLM land that have been extirpated (12.9.1015 (a)). Two others, South Sage Creek (BLM land) and Warren (DNRC land) are active white-tailed prairie dog colonies with potential to expand into adjacent habitat (12.9.1015 (d); Figure 1). These potential receiving areas are located within the range previously occupied by white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana; are in an area where the potential for white-tailed prairie dogs to move or expand onto colonies where they are not wanted is minimal (i.e. isolated, public lands), occur in an area where white-tailed prairie dogs are below management objectives, and could assist with the enhancement of low white-tailed prairie dog populations in areas of suitable habitat.

Receiving areas will be assessed for the availability of open burrows. Both November and Fossil City appear to have remnant mounds, and may still have subterranean burrow structure. In the absence of open burrows at receiving areas, silted-in holes from the previous occupancy would be reopened to provide temporary hiding cover for newly released prairie dogs and artificial burrows (as per Joe Truett, Turner Fund) will be provided where necessary.

On the advice of personnel from FaunaWest and Jo Ann Dullum (USFWS), both with extensive prairie dog re-establishment experience, small cages will be placed over holes containing newly released prairie dogs to acclimate the animals to their new surroundings. As many of these temporary containment cages as possible would be used and then removed as soon as prairie dogs have dug out. Such temporary containment (1-2 days, 'soft-release') promotes retention at the receiving site and reduces prairie dog movement post-release. Other release techniques may also be used on an experimental basis. Receiving areas lacking open burrows will be prepared by excavating trenches and inserting 4" diameter plastic tubing to serve as a temporary shelter for the initial release.

Land ownership patterns within a 6-mile radius for each of the proposed receiving areas is illustrated in Appendix F. Landowners within a 6-mile radius of each of the proposed receiving areas will be notified by certified mail, and receive a copy of this EA.

TABLE 4: IDENTIFIED SENDING & RECEIVING AREAS FOR WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG  
TRANSLOCATION UNDER ALTERNATIVE C.

Name	Sending or Receiving	Status	Size (ha)	Latitude	Longitude	Ownership	Rationale
Chance Bridge	Sending	Active	5.0	45.04360	109.05390	Private	Hwy construction
Border	Sending	Active	1.7	45.00185	109.05500	Private	Hwy construction
Grove Cr	Sending	Active	2.3	45.08494	109.03063	Private	Hwy construction
Sheep Cr (WY)	Sending	Active	40+	44.63542	108.25684	BLM	Large population
Dry Cr (WY)	Sending	Active	40+	44.60455	108.21738	BLM	Large population
November	Receiving	Extirpated	unkn	45.03696	108.82553	BLM	Intact burrows?
South Sage Cr	Receiving	Active	5.9	45.01220	108.63310	BLM/priv	Room to expand
Warren	Receiving	Active	7.5	45.04830	108.65500	DNRC	Room to expand
Fossil City	Receiving	Extirpated	<5**	45.0388	-108.5017	BLM	Burrows
Robertson Draw	Receiving	Active	40	45.02060	109.23690	USFS	Could expand*

\* The potential of the Robertson Draw site will depend upon the outcome of current changes in land ownership and the possibilities of a developing subdivision.

\*\* Known historical colony size

**Monitoring.** A monitoring plan would be established as per the guidance in ARM 12.9.1020 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-963.htm>). In order to assess the success of translocating white-tailed prairie dogs, re-established colonies will be mapped (area calculated) and activity will be assessed annually for three years following translocations. This will be done to ascertain the success of the translocation as per our identified objectives.

Currently, 2 of the proposed receiving areas (November and Fossil City) are historically occupied colonies that are currently unoccupied. If other active receiving areas are employed (South Sage Creek, Warren or Robertson Draw) in subsequent translocations occupied white-tailed prairie dog acreage will be delineated prior to translocation of white-tailed prairie dogs. Potential white-tailed prairie dog habitat at November is unknown but estimated to be less than 25 ac. Potential habitat at Fossil City is less than 10 ac.

Receiving areas will be mapped with Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment. Mapping will be conducted by walking around the outermost active burrow (determined by the presence of prairie dogs, fresh scat or fresh digging) and record the locations in a track file. Results of post-translocation monitoring will be provided to FWP for inclusion in the statewide database.

FWP and BLM will collaborate to map all white-tailed prairie dog colonies at least every 5 years to continue to monitor population trends.

**Conflict Resolution Plan.** Refer to Appendix D as per ARM 12.9.1025 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-964.htm>).



**Capture and Transportation.** In the first year, prairie dog capture would be attempted between June 15, 2006 and October 31 and will consist of at between 30-150 individuals, consistent with ARM 12.9.1030 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-969.htm>). As a result of the imminent highway construction in the spring, the white-tailed prairie dogs will need to be captured prior to the June 30 date indicated in ARM 12.9.1030. *We request special permission from the FWP R5 Regional Supervisor for this early date in 2006.* Trapping in subsequent years will not be attempted before June 30, as per ARM 12.9.1030. Between June 2006 and October 31, 2010, the target would be to translocate approximately 30-300 prairie dogs at 1-5 receiving areas.

Adjustments to the target number of prairie dogs (30-300) may be necessary depending on prairie dog catch rates, success of translocation efforts and time required for monitoring. Robinette, et al. (1995) recommended releases of a minimum of 60 black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) per release site. There have been few attempts to translocate white-tailed prairie dogs (throughout their range). Translocation techniques to be employed were developed Dullum et al. (2005), Truett et al. (2001) and Werner et al. (2003), and are based on experience with black-tailed prairie dogs.

It has also been proposed that due to the less social nature of white-tailed prairie dogs, that success may be increased with the relocation of fewer animals, and by using a 'soft-release' technique (including the use of artificial burrows). If there are few animals trapped at highway receiving areas (<30; Grove Creek, Chance Bridge, Border), translocating prairie dogs at the edge of the S. Sage Creek (an occupied white-tailed prairie dog colonies) would be preferable to releasing a small number of white-tailed prairie dogs at an isolated, previously extirpated colony.

Attempts would be made to trap female prairie dogs with their young and to release these family groups in approximately the same spatial arrangement in which they were caught. Sex and age composition of prairie dogs selected for translocation would be largely dependent on capture results. The effects of release group size and density would be one of several variables considered in effectiveness evaluations. Other variables include length of time since the receiving area was vacated, stocking density, sex and age composition of released groups, temporary caging at receiving areas (acclimation), spatial and social group effects, site variability, time of year etc. Re-establishment techniques would evolve as experience is gained.

**Sylvatic Plague Precautions and Quarantine Procedures.** Will follow ARM 12.9.1035 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-970.htm>). Sending and Receiving area would be monitored 14 days prior to trapping and again 48 hours prior to trapping to determine evidence of sylvatic plague. Prairie dogs will not be moved from an area with documented or presumed active sylvatic plague or within 5 miles of a sending area with active sylvatic plague for a minimum of one year. Should sylvatic plague be documented during pre-trapping monitoring, FWP will be notified.

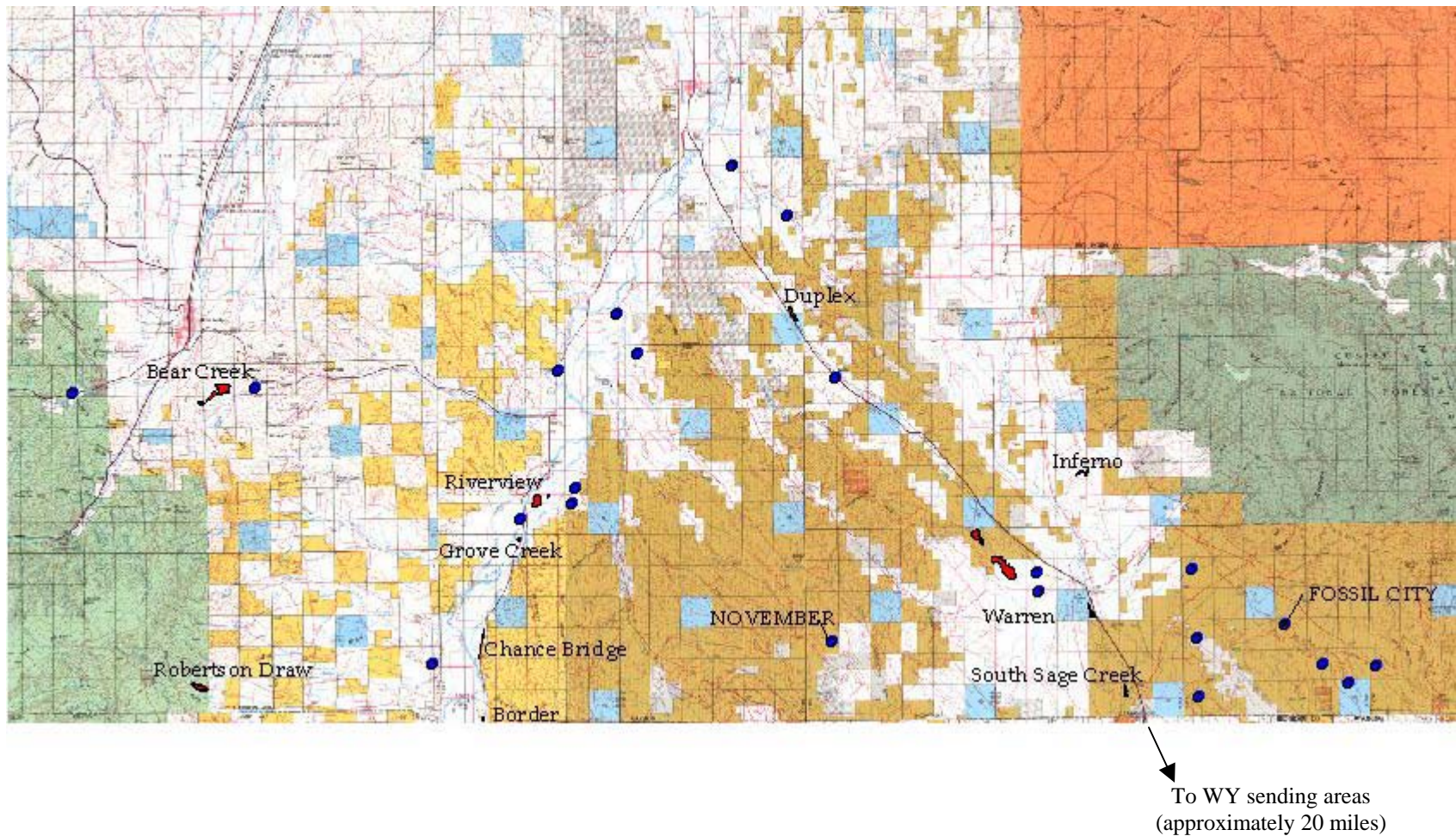
Areas targeted as receiving areas are all presumed to have been impacted by sylvatic plague, rather than agricultural practices. The persistence of plague at a site is unknown, but transplants

in 1997 and 1998 at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge to prairie dog colonies presumed to have been eliminated by plague have prospered.

Prairie dogs will be dusted with a flea/tick powder (carbaryl, permethrin, or other pulicide) to kill ectoparasites at the trap site. Any observation of sick or lethargic animals will trigger an immediate examination for plague. If symptoms cannot be explained by exposure to weather, specimens would be sent to the Center for Disease Control, Plague Branch in Fort Collins, CO.

In the absence of any evidence of plague, white-tailed prairie dogs captured from Grove Creek, Chance Bridge and Border colonies will be treated with a flea/tick powder (carbaryl, permethrin, or other pulicide) and, in the absence of any evidence of plague, will be 'soft-released' onto receiving areas (within 50 miles of the capture site, Table 4). Captured white-tailed prairie dogs from Wyoming (Sheep Creek, Dry Creek; Table 4) would be quarantined prior to reintroduction. Quarantine procedures are in place to prevent the spread of sylvatic plague and BLM and FWP would follow the protocols in ARM 12.9.1040 (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-973.htm>). Following 14 days quarantine in suspended cages, white-tailed prairie dogs would be moved to receiving areas.

FIGURE 1: LOCATIONS OF HISTORIC AND EXTANT WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG COLONIES. NAMED LOCATIONS HAVE KNOWN ACTIVE COLONIES (MAPPED RED), WITH THE EXCEPTION OF NOVEMBER AND FOSSIL CITY THAT ARE UNOCCUPIED COLONIES HEREIN PROPOSED AS RECEIVING AREAS. BLUE DOTS INDICATE HISTORIC, BUT CURRENTLY EXTIRPATED COLONIES TAKEN FROM FLATH 1979, THE MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM, MARMOT'S EDGE CONSERVATION AND FAUNA WEST CONSULTANTS.

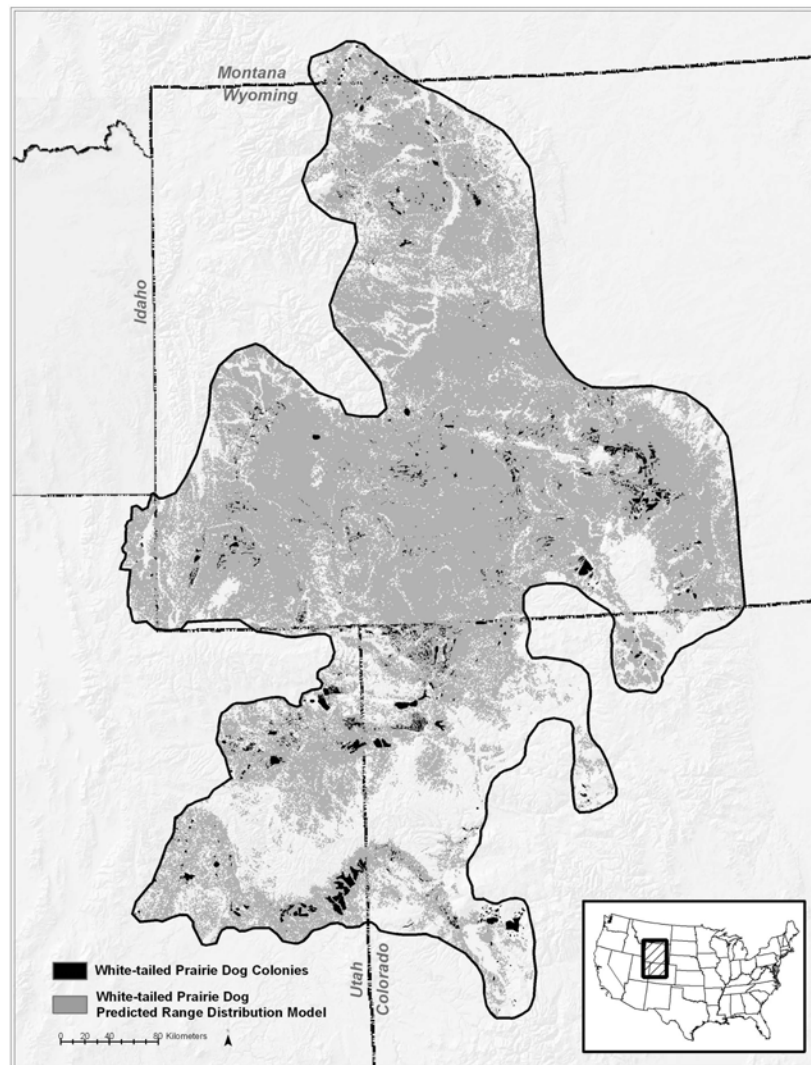


## **PART 3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

### **3.1 Introduction**

White-tailed prairie dogs inhabit intermountain basins, open shrublands, semi-arid to arid shortgrass steppes, and agricultural lands in Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado (Figure 2; Seglund et al. 2006). Their gross range occurs from extreme south-central Montana (0.9% of range), south through Wyoming (62% of range), extending into western Colorado (21% of range) and eastern Utah (16% of range). (Seglund et al. 2006).

FIGURE 2: WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG GROSS RANGE, PREDICTED RANGE AND LOCATION OF IDENTIFIED WTPD COLONIES FROM 1985-2003.





*The following is adapted from Seglund et al. (2006)*

White-tailed prairie dogs occur at elevations ranging from 1,150 m in Montana (Flath 1979) to 3,200 m (10,498 ft) in Colorado (Fitzgerald et al. 1994). White-tailed prairie dogs require deep, well-drained soils for development of burrows. Topography of inhabited areas is flat to gently rolling with slopes of less than 30% (Forrest et al. 1985).

White-tailed prairie dogs, like other prairie dog species, are found in relatively open plant communities with short-stature vegetation (Clark 1977). Preference for open areas is probably due to their dependence on visual surveillance for predators and intraspecific interactions (Fitzgerald and Lechleitner 1974 IN Seglund et al. 2006). However, white-tailed prairie dogs do not alter above ground vegetation structure, as do black-tailed prairie dogs (Coppock et al. 1983). Menkens et al. (1987) found no visual difference in the vegetation between occupied and unoccupied white-tailed prairie dog colonies.

White-tailed prairie dogs inhabit unpredictable, heterogeneous environments with short growing seasons, and because of this do not remain active year round. Juvenile emerge in late May to June. White-tailed prairie dogs cease above ground activity during periods when they are unable to meet metabolic needs (Seglund et al. 2004). Lack of precipitation, extreme daily temperatures and/or lack of forage and water appear to be the ultimate factors in induced dormancy. White-tailed prairie dogs generally hibernate for 4 to 5 months during the winter and may aestivate during mid- to late summer. However, the timing of these patterns varies with latitude and elevation.

The white-tailed prairie dog is one of the least colonial prairie dog species and often colonizes in an irregular pattern over the landscape. Reports of burrow densities vary greatly from location-to-location, ranging from 0.3-118/ac with a mean of 0.8-16.8/ac (Seglund et al. 1994). Unlike black-tailed prairie dog colonies where boundaries are normally easy to define, white-tailed prairie dog colonies are extremely difficult to characterize (Tileston and Lechleitner 1966; Forrest et. al. 1985). In addition, densities of adults and yearlings within a colony are usually significantly lower than those found in other prairie dog species (Clark 1977). Sociality is also less pronounced in white-tailed prairie dogs (Tileston and Lechleitner 1966; Clark 1977).

### **3.2 Location and History**

The areas involved are located in Carbon County, Montana (Fig. 1). The affected area is bounded on the north by the T. 8 S./T. 9 S. township boundary, on the east by the Crooked Creek Road, on the south by the Wyoming State line, and on the west by the R. 24 E./ R. 25 E. boundary. Montana is the northern extent of the range of the white-tailed prairie dog (0.9% of the gross range; Seglund et al. 2006), where it historically inhabited shrub-grassland habitats in the intermountain valleys between the Beartooth and Pryor Mountain Ranges in the south central portion of the state (Flath 1979). No pre-settlement records concerning distribution and abundance exist for the state, but anecdotal information from the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicated white-tailed prairie dogs were restricted to a triangular area bounded by Bridger, Crooked Creek and

Robertson Draw (Montana Prairie Dog Working Group 2002).

Land ownership within the range of the white-tailed prairie dog in Montana is primarily in private ownership (47%), followed by BLM (37%), USFS (12%) and state (4%) (Seglund et al. 2006). Agricultural lands impact 7% of the gross range within Montana while none of the gross range is impacted by urban development (Seglund et al. 2006). All colonies mapped in 2003 and 2005 were located on public lands, and/or adjacent to roadways. Currently, we have 10 active colonies comprising approximately 102 ha (253 ac).

### 3.3 Physical Resources

Topography consists of flat playa lakebeds, badlands, breaks and arid rangelands. Air quality is excellent. The climate is continental with hot, dry summers and cold winters. Average annual precipitation is 5-9 inches.

TABLE 5: A SUMMARY OF THE TOPOGRAPHY, VEGETATION, SETTING, AND HISTORY OF THE PROPOSED SENDING AND RECEIVING AREAS.

Name	Status	Topography	Dominant Plant species**	Setting	History	Landowner*
Border	ACTIVE	Flat	ARTR/BRTE	Nearby WTPD	Grazing	PVT
Chance Bridge	ACTIVE	Slope	BRTE/Forb	Nearby WTPD	Agric, disturbed	PVT
Dry Cr.	ACTIVE	Rolling	SAIB/CHNA/HAGL	Nearby WTPD	Grazing,	BLM
Grove Cr.	ACTIVE	Flat/Rolling	AGCR/POPR	Nearby WTPD	Agric	PVT
Sheep Mt.	ACTIVE	Rolling	HAGL/POSE SAIB	Nearby WTPD	Grazing	BLM
Fossil City	EXTINCT	??		Remote		BLM
November	EXTINCT	Rolling	POSE/STCO	Remote	stockpond	BLM
Robertson Draw	ACTIVE	Slope/Draw	STCO/KONI Grassland	Remote	Grazing	FS/PVT
S. Sage Cr.	ACTIVE	Flat/Gentle Slope	Chenopods/ARCA ARFR	Nearby WTPD	expanding	BLM
Warren	ACTIVE	Flat	POSE/Chenopods	Nearby WTPD		DNRC

\* PVT=private; BLM=Bureau of Land Management; FS=US Forest Service; DNRC=Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation

\*\* DOMINANT PLANT SPECIES CODES: *CODE*, *Scientific Name*, *common name*: AGCR, *Agropyron cristatum*, crested wheatgrass; ARCA, *Artemisia cana*, silver sagebrush; ARFR, *Artemisia frigida*, fringed sage; ARTR, *Artemisia tridentate*, sagebrush; BRTE, *Bromus tectorum*, cheatgrass; Chenopodiaceae, Chenopods–goosefoot family; CHNA, *Chrysothamnus nauseosus*, rubber rabbitbrush; HAGL, *Halogeton glomeratu*, halogeton; KONI, *Koeleria nitida*, prairie junegrass; POPR, *Poa pratensis*, Kentucky bluegrass; POSE, *Poa secunda*, Sandberg bluegrass; SAIB, *Salsola iberica*, Russian thistle; STCO, *Stipa comata*, needle and thread grass.

### 3.4 Biological Resources

Vegetation is primarily sagebrush, saltbush, and grassland with scattered juniper. Riparian vegetation consists primarily of scattered narrowleaf cottonwood, willows, sagebrush and greasewood community types. Upland vegetation is generally western wheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, needle and thread grass, threadleaf sedge and blue gramma. Major upland shrubs are big sagebrush and the dominant tree is Rocky Mountain juniper.

A diversity of wildlife common to intermountain valleys occurs. Big game species include mule deer, elk, and pronghorn antelope. Bighorn sheep, black bear, and wild horses occur in the Pryor Mountains. Bird life includes sage and sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge, prairie passerines and numerous raptors. Burrowing owls, mountain plovers, and ferruginous hawks may nest in the area. Golden eagles and prairie falcons are common, and a significant influx of spring migrant American kestrels occurs.

Listed threatened or endangered species occurring within the project area include only the bald eagle occurring in the area as a migrant. FWP Species of Concern and/or BLM Special Status Species include the burrowing owl, which is 80-85% dependent on prairie dog colonies; the mountain plover which nests on prairie dog colonies and other short vegetation colonies; and the other vertebrate species and vascular plants listed in Table 6.

TABLE 6: SPECIES OF CONCERN REPORTED IN THE TRANSLOCATION AREA IN CARBON COUNTY BY THE MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM.

### **Vertebrate Species**

Black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*)  
 Blue-gray gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*)  
 Brewer's sparrow (*Spizella breweri*)  
 Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*)  
 Fringed myotis (*Myotis thysanodes*)  
 Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*)  
 Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*)  
 Harlequin duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*)  
 Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*)  
 Merriam's shrew (*Sorex merriami*)  
 Mountain plover (*Charadrius montanus*)  
 Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*)  
 Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)  
 Preble's shrew (*Sorex preblei*)  
 Sage thrasher (*Oreoscoptes montanus*)  
 Spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*)  
 Townsend's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*)  
 White-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*)  
 Yellowstone cutthroat trout  
     (*Oncorhynchus clarkia bouvieri*)

### **Vascular Plants**

Beartooth large-flowered goldenweed  
     (*Haplopappus carthamoides* var. *subsquarrosus*)  
 Beautiful fleabane (*Erigeron formosissimus*)  
 Daggett rock cress (*Arabis demissa*)  
 Desert dandelion (*Malacothrix torreyi*)  
 Dwarf mentzelia (*Mentzelia pumila*)  
 Geyer's milkvetch (*Astragalus geyeri*)  
 Gray's milkvetch (*Astragalus grayi*)  
*Hutchinsia* (*Hutchinsia procumbens*)  
*Leptodactylon* (*Leptodactylon caespitosum*)  
 Lesica's bladderpod (*Lesquerella lesicii*)  
 Miner's candle (*Cryptantha scoparia*)  
*Nama* (*Nama densum*)  
 Obscure evening primrose (*Camissonia andina*)  
 Short-leaved bluegrass (*Poa curta*)  
 Shoshonea (*Shoshonea pulvinata*)  
 Small camissonia (*Camissonia parvula*)  
 Small-flowered pennycress (*Thlaspi parviflorum*)  
 Smooth buckwheat (*Eriogonum salsuginosum*)  
 Spiny hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*)  
 Sweetwater milkvetch (*Astragalus aretioides*)  
 Sword Townsendia (*Townsendia spathulata*)  
 Wind River milkvetch (*Astragalus oreganus*)  
 Wyoming sullivantia (*Sullivantia hapemanii*)  
 Yellow bee plant (*Cleome lutea*)

### **3.5 Economic Resources**

Recreation in the project area consists mainly of upland game bird and big game hunting, although some wildlife and wild horse viewing occurs. Fossil hunting in the area is popular.

The economy of the project area is predominately livestock grazing and mining. A nearby limestone quarry contributes to the economy, as does recreation and tourism. Prairie dogs and wildlife species associated with prairie dogs evolved with grazing. Sustainable livestock grazing is compatible with the continued existence of viable populations of these species.

### **3.6 Cultural Resources**

Some historic, paleontological and some important Native American sites occur in the vicinity. Portions of the area are within an ORV administrative restricted area.



## **PART 4.0     ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW/CONSEQUENCES**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This section of the EA will be described by alternatives and then by effects on resources within each alternative. *Italics* identify each resource within the alternative. Following the discussion for the proposed alternative are a series of tables and comments standard to FWP EAs.

### **4.2 Alternative A - No Action**

#### *Livestock Grazing*

There would be no impacts to grazing with a no action alternative.

#### *Threatened and Endangered Species, FWP Species of Concern, and BLM Special Status Species*

No action would negatively impact mountain plovers, and potentially black-footed ferrets (given the proximity to known occupied colonies in Wyoming), as no habitat would be provided for them. There would be no impact to the Yellowstone Cutthroat trout, bald eagles and other vertebrate species (Table 6). No vascular plant species of Concern would be impacted.

#### *White-tailed Prairie Dogs*

Population levels and distribution of prairie dogs would not be augmented. It may be many years, if at all, before some areas are repopulated with prairie dogs. There would be no impacts to potential donor populations of prairie dogs. White-tailed prairie dogs could be extirpated from Montana within 20 years. Any white-tailed prairie dogs that survive highway construction activities are most likely to attempt to survive on adjacent private lands.

#### *Other wildlife*

Other wildlife that utilize prairie dogs or the habitats they create would not be enhanced. Biodiversity would remain low and colonization by other species would also require 20-30 years. Habitat availability and quality for those species adapted to or requiring prairie dogs and/or their habitats would not be actively enhanced. No impact to fish, amphibians or reptiles would occur.

#### *Physical Environment*

No impacts.

### **4.3 Alternative B – Translocation of dogs immediately at risk along Highway 72**

#### *Livestock Grazing*

White-tailed prairie dogs are historic to the area and were considered when forage allocation occurred. There would be no change in permitted AUMs or grazing due to the proposed action. Sustainable livestock grazing is compatible with the continued existence of viable populations of these species.

#### *Threatened and Endangered Species, FWP Species of Concern, and BLM Special Status Species*

There would be no negative impacts to threatened, endangered or candidate species. Under this alternative vacant prairie dog habitat would be repopulated by translocating only the white-tailed prairie dog colonies immediately at risk. Loss of currently occupied sites along Highway 72, combine with repopulation of historically occupied sites would result in a probable decline or no net change in the habitat available for species associated with prairie dog colonies (burrowing owls, mountain plover, raptors). There would be no impact to the Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

#### *White-tailed Prairie Dogs*

Population levels and distribution of prairie dogs would be maintained if translocations are successful. If translocation is unsuccessful, there will be a decline in the population of white-tailed prairie dogs. Due to the imminent risk of highway reconstruction, entire colonies along Highway 72 will be translocated.

There is a concern of inadvertently spreading plague by moving prairie dogs. The mechanisms by which plague is spread are not well understood, but plague is already thought to have completed its cycle in Carbon County. Plague is thought to have caused the decline of prairie dogs at the targeted receiving areas. Plague's persistence at a site is unknown, but prairie dogs were successfully re-established in "plagued-out" areas of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in North Central Montana shortly after a prairie dog die-off. However, by following a standardized method of quarantine (ARM 12.9.1040; <http://161.7.8.61/12/12-973.htm>) and appropriate precautions for sylvatic plague (ARM 12.9.1035; <http://161.7.8.61/12/12-970.htm>) the potential for inadvertently translocating plague will be minimized.

#### *Other wildlife*

Species requiring substantial herbaceous vegetative cover (e.g. nesting sage grouse) would not likely be negatively impacted because white-tailed prairie dogs do not clip vegetation as substantially as black-tailed prairie dogs. Impacts would be low as colonies targeted for prairie dog releases are historically occupied prairie dog colonies.

Other wildlife that use or inhabit prairie dogs or the habitats they create would be enhanced if translocations are successful. White-tailed prairie dogs have been reduced to a portion of the area they once occupied in Montana, resulting in negative impacts to associated wildlife species. Successful translocations would benefit those species.

Overall species diversity would be increased. Impacts to reptiles or amphibians are probably negligible, but in the long term may be beneficial by providing additional habitat in or around prairie dog burrow systems. Short-horned lizards may increase, but sagebrush lizards will not likely be impacted. No impact to fish would occur, since few water bodies occur in the area.

#### *Physical Environment*

Initial holes would be opened at old prairie dog burrow colonies in attempts to connect with existing underground burrow systems, if needed. No other physical impacts would occur other than those that prairie dogs create. No air quality impacts would occur.

#### **4.4. Alternative C – Translocating Prairie Dogs immediately at risk and re-establishing extirpated colonies – PREFERRED**

##### *Livestock Grazing*

White-tailed prairie dogs are historic to the area and were considered when forage allocation occurred. There would be no change in permitted AUMs or grazing due to the proposed action. Sustainable livestock grazing is compatible with the continued existence of viable populations of these species.

##### *Threatened and Endangered Species, FWP Species of Concern, and BLM Special Status Species*

There would be no negative impacts to threatened, endangered or candidate species. Habitat availability for mountain plovers would increase if prairie dog translocations are successful and there would be increased opportunities to establish a viable mountain plover population in Carbon County. Prey availability and habitat quality for burrowing owls and ferruginous hawks and other raptors would increase if translocations are successful. There would be no impact to the Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

##### *White-tailed Prairie Dogs*

Population levels and distribution of prairie dogs would be increased if translocations are successful. Trapping from donor colonies would be spread among two areas in Wyoming and 3 colonies in Montana under immediate threat. Trapping would not substantially impact any single donor population (fewer than 30% of resident individuals would be trapped for translocation), with the exception of three white-tailed prairie dog colonies that are threatened with extirpation from highway construction. These are the only exceptions where an attempt will be made to capture and translocate 100% of resident white-tailed prairie dogs.

There is a concern of inadvertently spreading plague by moving prairie dogs. The mechanisms by which plague is spread are not well understood, but plague is already thought to have completed its cycle in Carbon County. Plague is thought to have caused the decline of prairie dogs at the targeted receiving areas. Plague's persistence at a site is unknown, but prairie dogs were successfully re-established in "plagued-out" areas of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in North Central Montana shortly after a prairie dog die-off. However, by following a standardized method of quarantine (ARM 12.9.1040; <http://161.7.8.61/12/12-973.htm>) and appropriate precautions for sylvatic plague (ARM 12.9.1035; <http://161.7.8.61/12/12-970.htm>) the potential for inadvertently translocating plague will be minimized.

#### *Other wildlife*

Species requiring substantial herbaceous vegetative cover (e.g. nesting sage grouse) would not likely be negatively impacted because white-tailed prairie dogs do not clip vegetation as substantially as black-tailed prairie dogs. Impacts would be low as colonies targeted for prairie dog releases are historically occupied prairie dog colonies.

Other wildlife that utilize prairie dogs or the habitats they create would be enhanced if translocations are successful. White-tailed prairie dogs have been reduced to a portion of the area they once occupied in Montana, resulting in negative impacts to associated wildlife species. Successful translocations would benefit those species.

Overall species diversity would be increased. Impacts to reptiles or amphibians are probably negligible, but in the long term may be beneficial by providing additional habitat in or around prairie dog burrow systems. Short-horned lizards may increase, but sagebrush lizards will not likely be impacted. No impact to fish would occur, since few water bodies occur in the area.

#### *Physical Environment*

Initial holes would be opened at old prairie dog burrow colonies in attempts to connect with existing underground burrow systems, if needed. No other physical impacts would occur other than those that prairie dogs create. No air quality impacts would occur.

#### **4.5. Critical Elements.**

The following critical elements of the environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action:

- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
- Environmental Justice
- Farm Lands, Prime or Unique
- Flood plains
- Native American Religious Concerns
- Socioeconomic Human Environment
- Waste, Hazardous or Solid
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Wilderness

#### 4.6 MEPA Checklist:

##### POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT.

	Potentially Significant	Moderate	Minor	None	Unknown	Comments below
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats				X		
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution				X		
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture				X		
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics				X		
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources	X					X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		

4. Minor clipping of vegetation may occur in receiving areas under a successful Alternative C.

7. Population levels and distribution of white-tailed prairie dogs would be increased if translocations are successful under Alternatives B or C. Trapping would be limited and would not substantially impact any single donor population, except for the 3 colonies under immediate threat from Highway 72 construction. In the latter case, 100% of resident individuals will be captured and translocated.

There would be no negative impacts to threatened, endangered or candidate species. Habitat availability for mountain plovers and burrowing owls would increase if prairie dog translocations are successful and there would be increased opportunities to establish a viable mountain plover population in Carbon County. Prey availability and habitat quality for burrowing owls and ferruginous hawks and other raptors would increase if translocations are successful. There would be no impact to the Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON HUMAN ENVIRONMENT.

	Potentially Significant	Moderate	Minor	None	Unknown	Comments below
1. Social structures & cultural diversity				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to and quality of recreational & wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services			X			X
11. Industrial & commercial activity			X			X
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environment plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

7., 10., 11. The proposed action would meet the mandate of Section 87-5-103 (1), Montana Code Annotated, which states in part that nongame wildlife species should be ‘perpetuated as members of ecosystems.’ The purpose of the proposed action is to re-establish white-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*) populations by translocating prairie dogs to colonies that have been extirpated or significantly reduced in recent years. Re-establishment would provide prey and habitat for a variety of wildlife, as well as ensure, maintenance of a viable white-tailed prairie dog population in Montana.

The "Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management Environmental Impact Statement A" (BLM, 1997) address sensitive species. Guidance common to all alternatives amended all Land Use Plans, and stated that some public rangelands would be managed for native wildlife species that require bare ground and/or low grass such as the prairie dog, mountain plover, and burrowing owl. It further stated that to be properly functioning, areas must have enough of these habitats to provide diversity in native plant and animal species.

The Miles City Standards and Guidelines cover the Billings Field Office. Standard #5 for Miles City states that an area would meet standards when habitats are provided for healthy, productive and diverse native plant and animal populations and communities. Viable populations were defined as populations that contain an adequate number of reproductive individuals distributed to ensure long-term existence.

The area would not meet standards if it were evaluated in its present condition. Augmenting the white-tailed prairie dog population would meet or be required by that portion of Standard 5 for BLM managed lands and Montana state law for all lands.

The economy of the project area is predominately livestock grazing and mining. A nearby limestone quarry contributes to the economy, as does recreation and tourism. Prairie dogs, mountain plovers, black-footed ferrets and other prairie species evolved with grazing, thus sustainable livestock grazing is compatible with the continued existence of viable populations of these species. The prairie dog populations are historic to the area and were considered when forage allocation occurred on BLM lands. There would be no change in BLM permitted AUMs or grazing due to the proposed action.

Oil and gas, and mineral exploration and development would continue to be reviewed as at present, but some areas occupied by white-tailed prairie dogs may require special stipulations.

TABLE 7: SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES.

ACTION	Prairie Dogs	Birds	Fish	Reptiles & Amphibians	Physical Environment
Alternative A	--	0	0	0	0
Alternative B	+	0	0	0	0
Alternative C	+++	+	0	+	0

## **PART 5.0 DESCRIPTION OF MITIGATION MEASURES & RESIDUAL IMPACTS:**

Access to all prairie dog colonies would be on existing roads and trails.  
(The approved Translocation Protocol procedures will be followed.)

There are no cumulative irretrievable, irreversible, or residual impacts anticipated from this action.

## **PART 6.0 LIST OF PREPARERS**

### *Current Draft:*

Jay Parks – Wildlife Biologist, USDI, BLM, Billings, Field Office.

Allison Puchniak – Native Species Specialist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

*Original Draft:*

Dan Hinckley - Wildlife Biologist, USDI, BLM, Montana State Office

Dennis Flath - Nongame Coordinator, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Jay Parks - Wildlife Biologist, USDI, BLM, Billings Field Office.

**PART 7.0 LITERATURE CITED**

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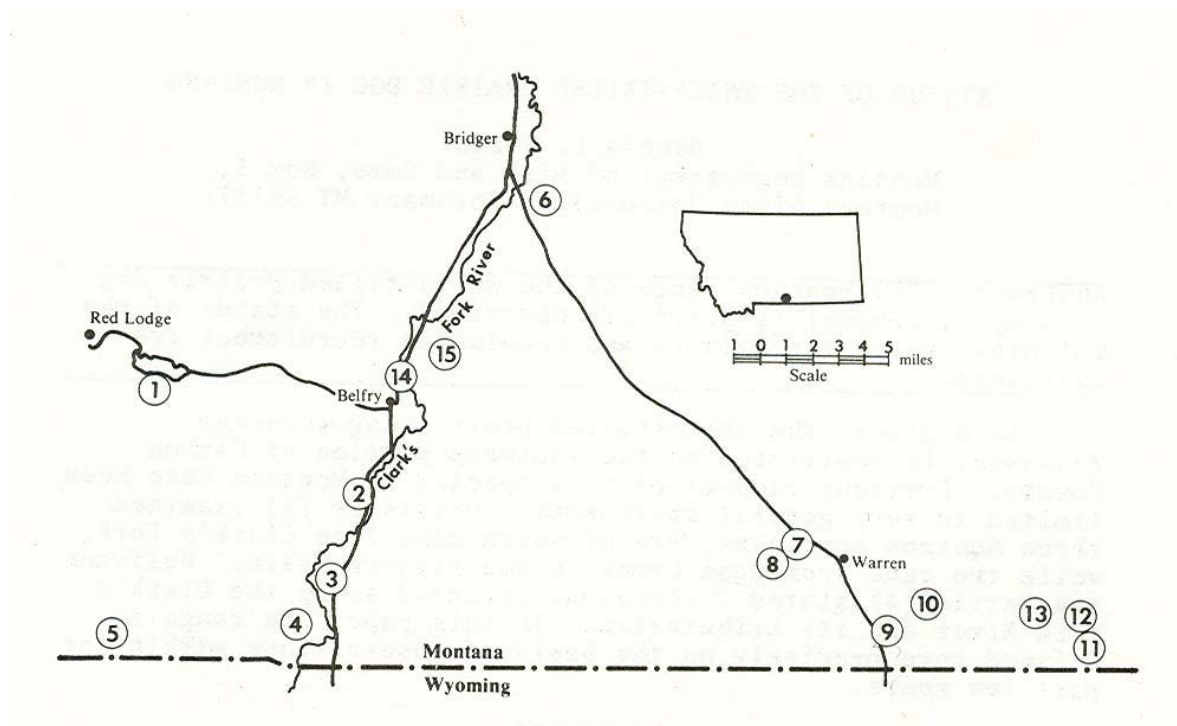
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## Appendix B

### Locations of white-tailed prairie dogs from Flath 1979

(Proc. Mont. Acad. Sci., Vol. 38 63-67)

Colony	Acreage	Ownership	Location
1	5-10	Pvt.	SE1/4, Sec. 1, T8S, R20E
2	2	Pvt.	Sec. 33, T8S, R22E
3	75-85	Pvt.	Secs. 16, 17, 20, T9S, R22E
4	19	Pvt.	Sec. 24, T9S, R21E
5	248	Pvt. (176), FS (48) BLM (24)	Secs. 26, 27, T9S, R20E
6	3	Pvt.	NE1/4, Sec. 3, T7S, R23E
7	70-100	Pvt.	Sec. 8, T7S, R23E
8	10-20	Pvt.	Secs. 7, 18, T9S, R25E
9	80	BLM	Secs. 26, 35, T9S, R25E
10	50-80	BLM	Sec. 19, T9S, R26E
11	40-60	BLM	Sec. 31, T9S, R27E
12	20-50	BLM	Sec. 30, T9S, R27E
13	3	BLM	Sec. 26, T9S, R26E
14	1-3	Pvt.	SW1/4, Sec. 2, T8S, R22E
15	3-10	Pvt.	NW1/4, Sec. 6, T8S, R23E



## APPENDIX C



In Reply To:

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Billings Field Office  
5001 Southgate Drive  
Billings, Montana 59101  
<http://www.mt.blm.gov/bifo/>



May 1, 2006

6820 (010.JP)

Division of Compliance  
FDA/CVM, HFV-235  
7519 Standish Pl.  
Rockville, MD 20885  
Attn: Shannon Jordre

Dear Mr. Jordre:

I am writing to request an exemption for USDI, Bureau of Land Management, Billings Field Office (BLM) and Region 5, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, from the restrictions placed on the translocation of wild prairie dogs. The purpose of translocating prairie dogs to currently unoccupied areas is to expand white-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*) populations on BLM public lands in Montana. These colonies will provide prey and habitat for a variety of associated wildlife, such as burrowing owls, mountain plovers, golden eagles, and ferruginous hawks. The 2002, the "Conservation Plan for the Management of Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana" recognized the importance of prairie dogs and maintenance of such habitats for other wildlife.

White-tailed prairie dog populations declined substantially from 15 colonies occupying 313 hectares in 1979 to 10 colonies occupying 102 hectares in 2005 in Carbon County, Montana. Circumstantial evidence suggests sylvatic plague, an exotic disease, was the likely cause of those declines as early as 1989-1991. Many wildlife species depended on prairie dogs and associated habitat, especially species of concern such as mountain plovers and burrowing owls.

We are currently proposing to translocate 3 white-tailed prairie dog colonies (9 ha, approximately 150 white-tailed prairie dogs), which are threatened with extirpation by highway construction. Additionally, attempts would be made to re-establish white-tailed prairie dog colonies at additional locations within their range in Montana between June 1, 2006 and October 31, 2010. Following the Translocation Protocol and proposal guidelines (Montana ARM 12.9.1001, et seq.), white-tailed prairie dogs would be live-trapped from BLM lands (Sheep Creek, Dry Creek) in Wyoming or from 'unwanted' private colonies in Montana. The initial target for re-establishment would be to translocate approximately 30-300 prairie dogs at 1-3

receiving areas. The two sending Areas in Wyoming are healthy populations of white-tailed prairie dogs. Trapping would not substantially impact any single donor population (<30%).

Therefore, the total number of individual white-tailed prairie dogs proposed for translocation between 2006-2010 could approach **450** (up to 150 in the short-term to translocate prairie dogs under immediate threat, and up to 300 prairie dogs in the long-term to augment smaller active colonies and to re-establish additional prairie dogs at extirpated locations).

Prairie dog colonization in many areas has been slow or non-existent. In the absence of special conservation actions, there is a possibility the white-tailed prairie dog could be extirpated from Montana during the next century. Maintenance of historical habitat is also needed to maintain species diversity in the area.

Currently, translocation techniques used were developed by Dullum (2001), Truett et. al (2001), and Werner et. al (2003). These techniques may change in the future as they are improved and refined. Better retention at the receiving areas has been achieved with acclimatization (Joe Truett, pers. comm.). Werner et al. (in press) achieved 80% retention rates using these techniques.

Trapping and translocating will begin no earlier than June 2006. Trained personnel using government vehicles and equipment will perform the work. Trapping will be done using baited Tomahawk and Tru-Catch live-traps. The traps will be baited for 48 hours and then set for capture and checked twice each day, at midday and late evening. Traps will be closed during periods of inclement weather to minimize stress on captured animals.

Prairie dogs captured in the midday session will be transported and released the same afternoon, but those captured in the evening will be held overnight and released the next afternoon. Prairie dogs held overnight will be fed, watered, kept in holding cages (24 in x 24 in x 16 in) made of wire mesh (1 in x 2 in), and placed inside a horse trailer to protect them from elements and predation.

Prairie dogs deemed to be at risk of sylvatic plague (per pre-trapping monitoring) will be quarantined. The following quarantine procedures will be adhered to.

- (1) Animals from Wyoming or from greater than 50 miles from the receiving site must be held in quarantine for at least 14 days.
- (2) Cages in quarantine facilities must be suspended by wires or chains at least one meter off the ground and separated from adjacent cages by a minimum of 60 centimeters.
- (3) Animals placed in quarantine cages must remain in the same cages for the duration of the quarantine. Animals that are not part of the original group under quarantine must not be placed in cages within the quarantined group or in adjacent cages.
- (4) Prairie dogs that die during the 14-day quarantine period must be necropsied and tested for plague. If plague is discovered within the group under quarantine, the group of animals must be kept in quarantine for an additional 14 days.

All captured prairie dogs will be released at designated receiving areas following the specified quarantine period. No prairie dogs will be kept in captivity. Therefore, the possibility of contracting or spreading monkey pox would be extremely low.

Receiving areas will have 20-25 trenches dug to 6 -8 feet deep. A 4 inch corrugated tube will be placed in the trench leaving a few inches on each end above ground then tubing will be back filled over. Two cages (24 in x 24 in x 16 in) with a 4-inch hole cut in the bottom will be placed on each end of the tube to prevent escape. Food and water will be provided during retention. They will be released from the cages after 4 days if they have not already tunneled out.

These translocations involve trapping, moving and releasing wild prairie dogs into the wild within a few days of capture. They will not be kept as pets, therefore, the possibility of contracting or spreading monkeypox would be extremely low.

Each animal will be aged, sexed, and the pelage marked with either freeze branding or hair bleach techniques for post release monitoring. The perimeters of the receiving colonies have been mapped using a Global Positioning System (GPS) before translocations, and at one and three years following translocations.

TABLE 1. LOCATIONS OF BILLINGS FIELD OFFICE DONOR AND RECEIVING PRAIRIE DOG COLONIES TO BE USED IN PRAIRIE DOG TRANSLOCATIONS.

Name	Sending or Receiving	Status	Size (ha)	Latitude	Longitude	Ownership	Rationale
Chance Bridge	Sending	Active	5.0	45.04360	109.05390	Private	Hwy construction
Border	Sending	Active	1.7	45.00185	109.05500	Private	Hwy construction
Grove Cr	Sending	Active	2.3	45.08494	109.03063	Private	Hwy construction
Sheep Cr (WY)	Sending	Active	40+	44.63542	108.25684	BLM	Large population
Dry Cr (WY)	Sending	Active	40+	44.60455	108.21738	BLM	Large population
November	Receiving	Extirpated	unkn	45.03696	108.82553	BLM	Intact burrows?
South Sage Cr	Receiving	Active	5.9	45.01220	108.63310	BLM/priv	Room to expand
Warren	Receiving	Active	7.5	45.04830	108.65500	DNRC	Room to expand
Fossil City	Receiving	Extirpated	<5**	45.0388	-108.5017	BLM	Burrows
Robertson Draw	Receiving	Active	40	45.02060	109.23690	USFS	Could expand*

\* The potential of the Robertson Draw site will depend upon the outcome of current changes in land ownership and the possibilities of a developing subdivision.

\*\* Known historical colony size

A copy of the Administrative Rule of Montana (ARMs) outlining the translocation protocol for translocation of prairie dogs is attached.

## LITERATURE CITED

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Truett, J. C., J. L. D. Dullum, M. R. Matchett, E. Owens, and D. Seery. 2001. Translocating prairie dogs: a review. Wildlife Society Bulletin. 29(3): 863-872.

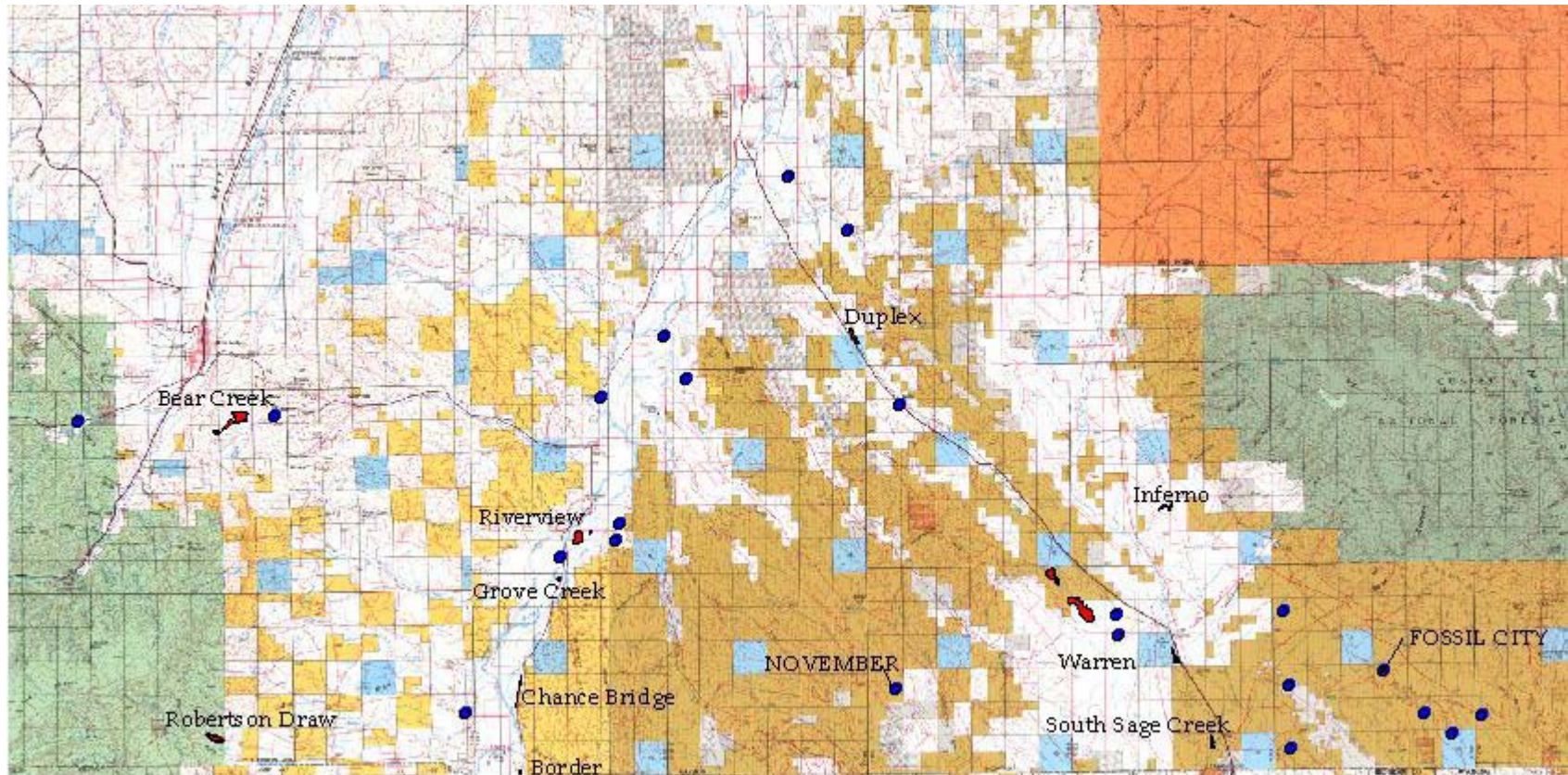
Werner, H. V., J. K. Hall, J. D. Tyler, and D. H. O'Keefe. Metal Collar Inserts to Acclimatize Black-tailed Prairie Dogs During Reintroduction. Wildlife Society Bulletin. In Press.

Sincerely,

Jay Parks  
Wildlife Biologist  
BLM Billings Field Office

CC: Martin Grenier, Wyoming Game and Fish Dept.  
Allison Puchniak, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

FIGURE 1: LOCATIONS OF HISTORIC AND EXTANT WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG COLONIES. NAMED LOCATIONS HAVE KNOWN ACTIVE COLONIES (MAPPED RED), WITH THE EXCEPTION OF NOVEMBER AND FOSSIL CITY THAT ARE UNOCCUPIED COLONIES HEREIN PROPOSED AS RECEIVING AREAS. BLUE DOTS INDICATE HISTORIC, BUT CURRENTLY EXTIRPATED COLONIES TAKEN FROM FLATH 1979, THE MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM, MARMOT'S EDGE CONSERVATION AND FAUNA WEST CONSULTANTS.



↙  
To WY sending areas  
(approximately 20 miles)



## APPENDIX D

April 1, 2006

### **Conflict Resolution Plan pursuant to ARM 12.9.1025**

The purpose of translocating prairie dogs to currently unoccupied areas is to expand white-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*) populations on BLM public lands in Montana. These colonies will provide prey and habitat for a variety of associated wildlife, such as burrowing owls, mountain plovers, golden eagles, and ferruginous hawks. The 2002, the “Conservation Plan for the Management of Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana” recognized the importance of prairie dogs and maintenance of such habitats for other wildlife.

The Miles City Standards and Guidelines cover the Billings Field Office. Standard #5 for Miles City states that an area would meet standards when habitats are provided for healthy, productive and diverse native plant and animal populations and communities. Viable populations were defined as populations that contain an adequate number of reproductive individuals distributed to ensure long-term existence. The area would not meet standards, if it were evaluated in its present condition. Augmenting the white-tailed prairie dog population would meet or be required by that portion of Standard 5 for BLM managed lands and Montana state law for all lands.

#### **Conflicts with Agricultural Production:**

White-tailed prairie dogs in Montana exist at the northern extent of their range. Given the small size of the population in Montana currently (10 known colonies occupying 102.5 ha) it is not anticipated that translocating white-tailed prairie dogs in Carbon County will have a detrimental impact on adjacent landowners. Likewise, receiving areas have been selected in the midst of large parcels of BLM lands to avoid impacting neighboring landowners within the 6-mile buffer zone (ARM 12.9.1005).

However, in the unlikely event that white-tailed prairie dogs disperse beyond the targeted area or expand beyond BLM managed lands, BLM-Billings Field Office and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks will work with adjacent landowners to resolve any conflicts. If white-tailed prairie dogs expand beyond the targeted area and onto neighboring landowner’s property within the 6-mile buffer area, and this neighbor would like to decrease the number of white-tailed prairie dogs on their property because of conflicts with agricultural production, BLM and FWP will work with the landowner to remove the expanded white-tailed prairie dogs. Removal methods may include translocation as described in this proposal or, if necessary, lethal control under the guidance of the Montana Department of Agriculture.

#### **Conflicts with Other Wildlife Species:**

BLM and FWP have addressed potential conflict with other wildlife species within the scope of the Environmental Assessment for translocation of white-tailed prairie dogs. Species requiring substantial herbaceous vegetative cover (e.g. nesting sage grouse) would not likely be negatively







In Reply To:

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
 Billings Field Office  
 5001 Southgate Drive  
 Billings, Montana 59101  
<http://www.mt.blm.gov/bifo/>



and



**Montana Fish,  
 Wildlife & Parks**

6820 (010.JP)

May 9, 2006

Dear Landowner:

In 2004, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) adopted Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM rules) outlining protocol to be followed for any future prairie dog translocations. According to the ARM (12.9.1005), we are notifying all landowners within a 6-mile radius of the affected property of our intentions by certified mail to afford you an opportunity to provide written or oral comments within 30 days of notification.

The purpose of translocating prairie dogs to currently unoccupied areas is to recover white-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*) populations on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands in Montana. These colonies will provide prey and habitat for a variety of associated wildlife, such as burrowing owls, mountain plovers, golden eagles, and ferruginous hawks. The 2002 *Conservation Plan for the Management of Black-tailed and White-tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana* recognized the importance of prairie dogs and maintenance of such habitats for other wildlife.

Montana's small white-tailed prairie dog population has declined substantially from 15 colonies occupying 773 acres in 1979 to 10 colonies occupying 251 acres in 2005 in Carbon County, Montana. Conversion of shrub/grassland habitats to agriculture and apparent sylvatic plague are probable causes of the decline in Montana's white-tailed prairie dog population. White-tailed prairie dogs in Montana are at the northern limit of their range and their decline during this century may represent a range contraction. The risk of the white-tailed prairie dog being extirpated from the state in the short-term future is high. White-tailed prairie dogs are present in significant numbers in Wyoming, immediately south of currently existing colonies in Montana. For more information on white-tailed prairie dogs visit [http://fwp.mt.gov/fieldguide/detail\\_AMAFB06020.aspx](http://fwp.mt.gov/fieldguide/detail_AMAFB06020.aspx) on Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks website.

We are currently proposing to translocate 3 white-tailed prairie dog colonies (up to 150 individual white-tailed prairie dogs occupying a total of 22 acres), which are threatened with extirpation by reconstruction of Highway 72. The initial target of the translocation proposal is to translocate approximately 30-150 prairie dogs at 1-3 receiving areas on BLM lands. In addition, we have proposed re-establishing 2 historically occupied white-tailed prairie dog colonies on BLM lands between June 1, 2007 and October 31, 2010. Following Montana ARM 12.9.1001,

et seq. (<http://161.7.8.61/12/12-951.htm>) white-tailed prairie dogs would be live-trapped from identified sending areas.

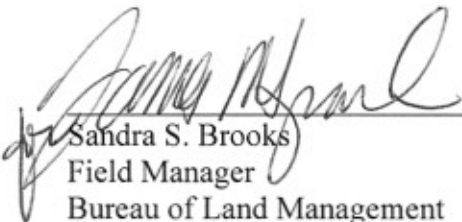
Therefore, the total number of white-tailed prairie dogs proposed for translocation between 2006-2010 could be approximately 450 (150 individuals under immediate threat, in the short-term, and up to 300 additional individual prairie dogs to augment smaller active colonies and to re-establish additional prairie dogs at extirpated locations, in the long term).

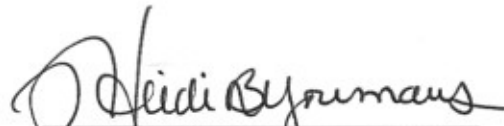
The proposed action would meet the mandate of Section 87-5-103(1), MCA, which states in part that nongame wildlife species should be... "perpetuated as members of ecosystems." Details regarding methodology and proposed alternatives can be found in the attached Environmental Assessment jointly prepared by BLM and FWP. The EA can also be viewed at [www.mt.blm.gov/bifo](http://www.mt.blm.gov/bifo) or [www.fwp.state.mt.us](http://www.fwp.state.mt.us) under Public Notices. Paper copies can be requested from the BLM, Billings Field Office, at 896-5013 or by mail at the address above.

We invite you to submit any comments on the attached proposal via mail or email to one of the biologists below. Questions and comments will be accepted until June 12, 2006. If you would like to provide your comments during an open house, please contact Jay Parks (406-896-5244) or Allison Puchniak (406-247-2966) and we will schedule a public meeting in Carbon County. Additional paper copies can be requested by mail from the BLM, Billings Field Office, at (406) 896-5013 or Region 5, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, at (406) 247-2940.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

  
Sandra S. Brooks  
Field Manager  
Bureau of Land Management

  
Heidi B. Youmans  
Nongame Bureau Chief  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Submit comments to:  
Jay Parks  
Wildlife Biologist  
[jparks@blm.gov](mailto:jparks@blm.gov)  
BLM, Billings Field Office  
5001 Southgate Drive  
Billings, MT 59101

Allison J Puchniak  
Native Species Biologist  
[apuchniak@mt.gov](mailto:apuchniak@mt.gov)  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
2300 Lake Elmo Drive  
Billings, MT 59105